The Challenges of Monitoring Social Media in the Arab World: The Case of the 2019 Tunisian Elections

Mona Elswah
University of Oxford

Philip N. Howard
University of Oxford

ABSTRACT

Tunisian civil society groups raised alarms about the spread of disinformation and hate speech during the 2019 elections. These concerns centered around the legal and technical obstacles faced by Tunisian civil society actors monitoring elections on social media. We interviewed civil society leaders and digital rights activists in Tunisia to learn about the kinds of limitations they encountered when observing the Tunisian elections. We conclude that: (1) Tunisian civil society groups were concerned about the spread of disinformation online but efforts to monitor social media were limited and not coordinated between groups; (2) the Facebook ad library was of limited use to Tunisian observers because the library does not archive electoral or political ads in Tunisia; (3) the limited access to Facebook data was a significant obstacle for Tunisian social media observers, leading them to rely upon manual data gathering, and compounded by the unavailability of data collection tools such as CrowdTangle to many civil society groups; (4) Tunisian laws around data privacy and election regulations are insufficient for a democratic society in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Arab world experienced presidential elections as well as political crises, mass uprisings, and regime changes. Despite some hopeful trends for democratisation following the Arab Spring, the Arab world remains a place for some of the world's most resilient dictatorships, experiencing substantial censorship and frequent human rights violations. Even though Arabic is the fourth most popular language on the Internet, social media firms do not seem to prioritise support for democracy advocates where Arabic is spoken.[1]

This is best exemplified by Facebook, which in 2019 implemented a variety of technical and policy measures to address election-related concerns in places including Canada, Brazil, the US, UK, EU, Australia, and India. Despite elections taking place across the Arab region, there were no references to measures relating to elections or political events there.[2] Moreover, in terms of countering disinformation, Facebook has partnered with a single third-party fact-checker to cover the entire Middle East and North Africa region, compared with the seven partners it had engaged with to cover the US.[3] Such a lack of attention was also evident during the Tunisian elections.

Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, had two rounds of presidential elections and one parliamentary election during the autumn of 2019. Following the sudden death of the Tunisian President Beji Caïd Essebsi in July 2019, the presidential elections had to be held earlier than scheduled. Testing its nascent democracy, twenty-six candidates, including two women, ran in the first round of the presidential race in September 2019.[4] In this round, the law professor Kais Saied and the media mogul Nabil Karoui claimed the lead.[5] Three weeks later, Tunisians headed to the polls to elect new members of the parliament.[6] The second round of the presidential elections was held a few days later and the independent candidate Kais Saied won the race with more than 70% of the votes.[7] According to civil society groups that observed the election, Facebook was used extensively for political campaigning by undeclared political actors and content, for the most part, unmonitored by observation agencies.[8,9]

In this study, we interviewed twenty civil society leaders and digital rights activists in Tunisia following the 2019 elections and asked: (1) How did Tunisian civil society monitor social media during the elections? (2) What were the technical and legal challenges they faced while monitoring social media? (3) What would be the counter-measures appropriate for disinformation in Tunisia?

TUNISIA'S NEW DEMOCRACY

In 2011, Tunisians surprised the world in organising peaceful protests against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, one of the longest-serving Arab presidents, starting what was later called the Arab Spring. Observers were optimistic with regard to the prospects of Tunisia transitioning into democracy because of its homogeneous society, moderate Islamists, and relatively-open economy.[10] This prediction has been somewhat accurate given that Tunisia is considered the only country that has not returned to authoritarianism or experienced large-scale violence.[11]

To prevent the consolidation of power, Tunisia's 2014 Constitution split power between the president and the approved cabinet and prime minister.[12] In 2014, Tunisia elected a new parliament and president in its first democratic elections under the new constitution.[13] The Nidaa Tounes (translated as Call of Tunisia) party won the majority of seats while its presidential candidate, Beji Caïd Essebsi, secured more than 55% of the votes in the 2014 presidential election.[14]

In contrast to Tunisia's process of democratisation, its economy remains in turmoil. High inflation rates and rising unemployment have played a significant role in the elections, with growing dissatisfaction among Tunisians.[15] In July 2019, the country's democracy was further tested when they had only 90 days to organise presidential elections following the death of President Essebsi.[16] Nonetheless, organised successfully, there was a reported 55% voter turnout.[17]

SOCIAL MEDIA IN TUNISIA

Examining the countries involved in the Arab Spring sheds light on both the positive and negative aspects of social media. In 2011, Tunisian activists organised resistance and protests against Ben Ali using social media platforms, mainly Facebook.[18] After ousting Ben Ali, Tunisian activists continued to engage in online civic actions.[19]

Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Tunisia. There are more Tunisians on Facebook than there are registered voters in the country.[20] About 66% of Tunisians have subscribed to Facebook, making Tunisia the top country in the Maghreb to use Facebook.[21] By contrast, Twitter is much less popular in Tunisia, with only 3% of Tunisians using the service.[21] Hence, election observers have concentrated social media monitoring efforts in Tunisia have largely focused on analysing Facebook during the elections.

Prior to the 2019 elections, fears of local and foreign election interference increased. In May 2019, Facebook announced the removal of 265 Facebook and Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, groups, and events originating in Israel that were targeting several countries, including Tunisia.[22] During the elections, Tunisian civil society organisations raised concerns about the spread of disinformation and polarising content on Facebook. Civil society organisations found that there were orchestrated campaigns on Facebook to discredit candidates and spread hate speech before and during the 2019 presidential elections.[8,9]

In addition to those fears, civil society organisations raised concerns about how their lack of access to Facebook data limits their analyses.[23] In this memo, we highlight these restrictions and describe the strategies that civil society groups have used to monitor the elections in the absence of access to Facebook data. We conclude by explaining the limitations of Tunisian laws for the regulation of disinformation and for monitoring social media.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the challenges and opportunities of monitoring social media in Arabic contexts, we focused our study on the 2019 Tunisian presidential and parliamentary elections. In December 2019, the lead author, Mona Elswah, an Arabic-native speaker, interviewed a sample of twenty civil society and digital rights activists in Tunisia. The majority of the snowball sample were females with high levels of education. The open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic and English. Consent forms were collected and signed by the participants before the interviews. We were able to collect 22 hours of data with an average of one hour per interview. All of our interviews were conducted face to face at locations chosen by the participants.

To collate their insights and experiences, we focused on four areas during the interviews: (1) their observation efforts during the elections, (2) the legal framework in Tunisia in regard to social media, (3) the obstacles they encountered during the observation, and (4) the measures employed to counter online disinformation during the elections by platforms, regulatory bodies, and civil society groups.

Participants interviewed included individuals from various civil society groups and tech-experts who observed social media during the elections. Our participants were employed by the following organisations: The Tunisian Association for the Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE – French acronym), Access Now, I Watch, Youth Without Borders, The Chahed Observatory (translated as, See Observatory), Mourakiboun (translated as, Watchers), the Ofiya Coalition (translated as, the Loyalists Coalition), Modawenoon Bela Qyood (translated as, Bloggers Without Restrictions), Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, and the big data and market research company WebRadar, as well as independent digital rights activists.

During the interviews detailed fieldnotes were taken. Memos were drafted after each interview to identify the themes underpinning the observations of the participants. These memos were later aggregated to further develop the identification of patterns and concepts in the comments by interviewees.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1) Attempts to Monitor Social Media

The first attempt to examine the social media sphere in Tunisia took place during the 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections. In the interviews we were informed that the organisation Mourakiboun initiated a project called *Rasd1* to observe hate speech on social media, and that they were the only organisation to examine social media at that time. Interviewees consistently confirmed that observing social media platforms was not the main focus of civil society organisations before the 2019 elections.

During the preparation for the 2019 Tunisian presidential and parliamentary elections, Tunisia's Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE – French acronym) announced that all presidential candidates and political parties should declare their official Facebook pages before running for the elections. However, interviewees stated that the process was insufficient for countering disinformation on Facebook. Sarah Jenane, a project manager at WebRadar, said that despite this regulation, some candidates did not declare their official pages to ISIE, and that misinformation was being disseminated through undeclared pages.

Moreover, there have been issues with the capabilities of the High Independent Authority of the Audio-Visual Commission (HAICA – French acronym), an independent body established to regulate the broadcast media in Tunisia given the task of monitoring the official Facebook pages of TV and Radio outlets in Tunisia. Bassem Matar, the Vice President of ATIDE, stated that:

> HAICA was responsible for observing the media outlets' social media accounts, while ISIE was responsible for observing candidates' official social media accounts. Yet, we realised that both organisations lack the adequate technical and human resources to perform this observation (Bassem Matar, December 2019).

In addition to monitoring the posts on the official Facebook pages, all Facebook Ads on the candidates' official pages were also regulated and monitored by ISIE. Henda Fellah, a project coordinator for I Watch, explained that:

> For the presidential elections, they [the candidates] were told that they could use sponsored ads under the condition that they declare them. However, in the parliamentary elections, it is not allowed to use ads (Henda Fellah, December 2019).

In addition to ISIE and HAICA's attempts to observe and regulate social media during the elections, civil society groups launched projects focusing on the online sphere in 2019. Based on our interviews, only three groups had the human and financial capacity to run projects monitoring social media: I Watch, ATIDE (in partnership with Democracy Reporting International), and Mourakiboun. However, they worked separately with little coordination, and each group followed a distinct methodological approach. The others have confirmed that they lacked the funds, technical knowledge, and the time to serve as social media observers. Nabil Labassi, president of Ofiya Coalition, an organisation that only monitored traditional media, noted that:

> This needs resources and funding. We tried to get the funding and we have the skills, but the main problem was the funding. We found funders who only wanted to examine the official pages which we considered to be pointless (Nabil Labassi, December 2019).

Moreover, a number of participants pointed out that civil society groups and ISIE were pressed for time. Following the death of President Essebsi in July 2019, the elections were brought forward and took place in September instead of November. This, according to the participants, forced them to rush their observation plans.

Despite the particular popularity of Facebook, the majority of the respondents expressed concern with a flood of disinformation through other platforms. No efforts were made by official regulatory bodies or civil society groups to investigate these other platforms.

2) "Facebook Has Let Us Down"

The study participants emphasised that monitoring the elections on Facebook was extremely difficult. They pointed to the lack of access to Facebook data and the absence of tools needed to collect real-time data. For example, ATIDE, in partnership with Democracy Reporting International, planned to monitor Facebook using Netvizz, a data collection and extraction application for Facebook data.[24] Facebook blocked this application in August 2019, only a few weeks before the Tunisian elections. Social media observers in Tunisia relied either on the manual detection of disinformation or on CrowdTangle to examine Facebook.

CrowdTangle is a content discovery and social analytics tool owned by Facebook. In January 2019 Facebook announced that it intended to open up access to CrowdTangle to more researchers and analysts worldwide to support research into disinformation.[25] However,

access to CrowdTangle services was another struggle for Tunisian civil society groups and researchers. The CrowdTangle service was restricted to those with a partnership contact at Facebook and continues to be so.[26] Through our interviews, we learned that CrowdTangle was only indirectly accessible to one organisation in Tunisia. Furthermore, that organisation claimed that CrowdTangle gave them only limited insights into the use and role of Facebook in Tunisia.

It was evident from our interviews that social media observers consistently relied upon the manual analysis of Facebook data as a method for monitoring the elections in Tunisia. Participants explained that they hired teams to manually track lists of pages on a daily basis because of the lack of tools. To do this, observers archived screenshots of posts and ads.

To follow ISIE's regulations, presidential candidates had to declare how much they were spending on their campaigns. This included the expenses of sponsoring Facebook ads on their official pages. To monitor the candidates spending, civil society observers relied on the Facebook Ad Library which was another challenge during the Tunisian elections.

In early 2019, Facebook announced the launch of its ad library with a view to providing advertising transparency. The library was promoted as a hub where running Facebook and Instagram ads could be searched.[27] It was stated that ads about "issues, elections or political" topics would be archived for seven years and supplemented by disclosures about who had funded the ad, the target audience, and how much was spent on the ad.[28] These resources only available in 57 countries and territories, none of which are Arab countries.[29] Thus, for Tunisia, the Facebook ad library only provided access to active ads with no further information on the funder, expenses, or the target audience.

The ad library was therefore the only tool available for civil society groups to observe the sponsored ads, but it provided limited data. From the interviews, respondents explained that they struggled to monitor the ads in real-time, knowing that they would not be archived otherwise. Emna Sayadi, MENA Campaigner at Access Now, elaborated:

> We wanted Facebook to offer access to information about how much money is spent on a political ad which was not something you can see in Tunisia, but you can see in the US. This is why we questioned why Facebook was doing this. Facebook is supposed to be an international platform (Emna Sayadi, December 2019).

This challenge was evident during the election blackout period, Abir Cherif, CEO of WebRadar, said:

> By law, you have two silence days, normally there is no ad sponsoring. If you missed checking the ad library in these two silence days, you will miss the chance to know if someone was sponsoring ads or not (Abir Cherif, December 2019).

This led the Access Now team to write an open letter to Facebook on 30 August, co-signed by another 14 civil society groups in Tunisia, demanding the implementation of effective measures for transparency and accountability before the elections.[30] According to Sayadi, Facebook only replied two months after the elections, very generically, that

> [t]hey have a language barrier and that they don't have a lot of people speaking Arabic so they can't really identify which ads and which pages are political (Emna Sayadi, December 2019).

The majority of respondents felt that Facebook does not consider Tunisia a significant country for their platform. Fadoua El Ouni, a junior election specialist at I Watch said:

> The fact that they did not give us access to the ad library is because they do not perceive Tunisia as important (Fadoua El Ouni, December 2019).

3) "Our Outdated Laws"

Interviewees claimed that the legal and regulatory systems in Tunisia were not fit for the current digital age. For example, Access Now's Dima Samaro, the MENA policy associate, stated that the Tunisian personal data protection law could not be used to prevent the harvesting of data online or to regulate social media companies:

> The [Tunisian] data protection law is outdated and was issued in 2004. A lot of things have changed since then, and anything relating to personal data protection in terms of the Internet does not exist (Dima Samaro, December 2019).

In addition, there were no references to the role and implications of social media in the articles of the electoral law. There were no regulations that relate to the use of Facebook ads or the manipulation of online content during elections. El Ouni explained that:

> Clearly, the social media sphere is not covered by the electoral law. ISIE in its decisions tried to include the social media aspect but

eventually they had to stick to the legal framework in Tunisia (Fadoua El Ouni, December 2019).

In addition, there was a significant lack of attention to regulating disinformation in Tunisian law. The government has regulated disinformation under Article 86 of the 2001 Telecommunication Code, which was not designed with an awareness of social media. Furthermore, Mohamed Bouchiba, a co-founder of Bloggers Without Restrictions, claimed that there are over a hundred lawsuits against people who posted or shared something on social media using Article 86, and these are being used in a draconian fashion:

> They took the Telecommunication Code and its articles that don't apply to bloggers and employed them. Why Article 86? Because it is the only one that criminalises people and could put them in jail (Mohamed Bouchiba, December 2019).

As such, these legal loopholes pose significant threats to the Tunisian public sphere if not resolved. During the interviews, respondents stated that they plan to push for legal amendments to address these issues before the next elections in Tunisia.

CONCLUSIONS

Tunisian civil society groups raised alarms about the spread of disinformation and hate speech during the 2019 elections. These concerns centered around the legal and technical obstacles faced by Tunisian civil society actors monitoring elections on social media. We interviewed civil society leaders and digital rights activists in Tunisia to learn about the kinds of limitations they encountered when observing the Tunisian elections. We conclude that: (1) Tunisian civil society groups were concerned about the spread of disinformation online but efforts to monitor social media were limited and not coordinated between groups; (2) the Facebook ad library was of limited use to Tunisian observers because the library does not archive electoral or political ads in Tunisia; (3) the limited access to Facebook data was a significant obstacle for Tunisian social media observers, leading them to rely upon manual data gathering, and compounded by the unavailability of data collection tools such as CrowdTangle to many civil society groups; (4) Tunisian laws around data privacy and election regulations are insufficient for a democratic society in the digital age. From the interviews conducted, participants recommended that Tunisia's electoral and personal data protection laws to be

amended for modern campaigning and electioneering. Most importantly, interviewees stressed that Facebook, the platform with the most participation in Tunisia, needs to provide more access to its data and an archive of Arabic political ads in order to provide an assessment of its implications for Tunisian democracy.

It will be difficult for democracy in Tunisia to flourish without Facebook and other platforms providing sustained support and data to civil society groups battling hate speech, computational propaganda, and misinformation on social media. Though amendments to Tunisian law could be beneficial for encouraging the country's democracy, legal reforms could also be misused in the broader Arab world where democracy is fragile and restricted by authoritarianism. Hence, a greater responsibility falls on platforms to act in this region.

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